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17 California Latinx Youth as Agents of Sociolinguistic Justice

Mary Bucholtz, Dolores Inés Casillas, and Jin Sook Lee

Introduction

Over the past twenty years, young Californians from minoritized groups, especially Latinxs, have been subjected to legalized bigotry via the banning of their language from the classroom. This cruel policy took effect in a climate of anti-immigrant hysteria that began in the 1980s and 1990s. In 1986, California voters passed Proposition 63, which made English the state's official language (even though the United States itself does not have an official language). This was followed in 1994 by the openly xenophobic Proposition 187, or the "Save Our State" initiative, which aimed to deprive unauthorized immigrants of education and health care services.[1] Thus, by 1998, the groundwork was in place for California voters to approve Proposition 227, a ballot initiative ending nearly all bilingual education in public schools. Instead, it required students classified as English learners to be taught exclusively in that language and for them to be moved into mainstream classes after only a year. Despite its campaign's feel-good slogan "English for the Children," Proposition 227, along with similar measures in Arizona and Massachusetts, has had deeply harmful effects on the language and education of an entire generation of students, particularly young Latinxs (Gutiérrez, Baquedano-López, and Asato 2000). Proposition 227 was not rescinded until November 2016, when California voters passed Proposition 58, which gives local communities control over decisions about how best to educate English learners in their schools (the effects of this measure are not yet clear).

Four months before Proposition 227 passed, a similar policy was enacted in the city of Santa Barbara, where the three of us teach at the University of California. The all-white school board unanimously approved a measure to immediately place all English learners in mainstream classrooms, ignoring the powerful arguments of researchers, educators, and Latinx parents in favor of bilingual education. The racism and xenophobia that often motivate such policies were evident in the comments of many white residents; in one notorious—and paradoxical—remark, a board member explained that the policy reflected the preferences of white parents: "They don't want their kids to go to a school where half the kids speak Spanish. People want their children to have a happy, open learning experience" (Bruni 1998).

Some states went even further: After rendering students' languages illegal, Arizona lawmakers began to target their cultures and histories (Cammarota and Aguilera 2012). Chicanx studies classes were banned from Arizona's public schools in 2010, even though such classes result in greater academic success for Latinx students (Cabrera, Milem, Ozan, and Marx 2014). Justifications for the ban included blatantly racist assertions that such courses foment "ethnic solidarity," racism (against whites), and even the overthrow of the U.S. government.

Due to these political developments, many Americans of Latinx heritage have experienced their entire education under draconian and discriminatory policies that ban both their language and their culture. Young people's languages of heritage have been devalued and ignored, despite the established importance of students' home languages for future academic success and social well-being (Wiley et al. 2014). In the face of such marginalization, Latinx youth in California have been demanding sociolinguistic justice, or "self-determination for linguistically subordinated individuals and groups in sociopolitical struggles over language" (Bucholtz et al. 2014, 145).

These acts of sociolinguistic justice are also acts of agency—that is, directed action that affects the self, others, and/or the larger world. Yet adults often fail to recognize the considerable social agency of youth, especially in institutional settings such as schools, which impose structural constraints on what counts as legitimate knowledge and action. As the three examples below demonstrate, such agency is the basis of social activism by challenging and potentially changing conditions of injustice.

The SKILLS Program

We focus on the social agency of youth participants in an academic partnership program with a social justice focus, School Kids Investigating Language in Life and Society (SKILLS), which was established in 2010 to address linguistic, educational, socioeconomic, and racial inequities in our region (skills.ucsb.edu). SKILLS creates collaborations between teams of graduate student instructors and undergraduate mentors on the one hand and youth from area high schools and youth-serving organizations on the other. Most participants are from low-income Mexican American families and are the first generation in their families to have the opportunity to pursue higher education. Within the SKILLS partnership, our goal is not youth empowerment, which presupposes an asymmetrical distribution of power and knowledge, but rather accompaniment, which involves joint activity and mutual learning among all participants (Bucholtz, Casillas, and Lee 2016).

The SKILLS program supports young people's linguistic and cultural identities as well as their development of academic skills and knowledge. Together, participants work through a five-month-long college-level curriculum on language and race; whenever possible, students receive college credit at no cost thanks to a partnership with a local community college. Activism

within SKILLS draws on the model of youth participatory action research, in which young people carry out original research to challenge inequitable conditions in their lives and communities (Cammarota and Fine 2008). The student researcher-activists combine their linguistic and cultural expertise with the conceptual and methodological tools they encounter in SKILLS to critically examine issues of language, race, identity, and power in their everyday lives. They develop original projects about these issues and share the results in public presentations at the end of the program. Through their work, SKILLS students contribute to the advancement of sociolinguistic justice both locally and more widely.

Youth Agency and Sociolinguistic Justice

Below we present three illustrations of SKILLS students as agents of social change. In each case, young people utilized their linguistic and cultural expertise to identify and respond to an inequity that deeply and personally affected them. And in each case, although the students were accompanied and supported by instructional team members, the social changes they enacted—from changing minds to changing policy—were due to their own efforts as agents and activists of sociolinguistic justice.

Example 1: Elisa and Linguistic Access

Our first example, based on research by graduate student instructor Audrey Lopez (2018), involves social change at a local partner school, Mission City High School (a pseudonym). The student researcher-activist who was the agent of this change, whom we call Elisa, was a senior at the school in 2014 who worked as a volunteer bilingual interpreter between Spanish-speaking adults and English-monolingual institutional representatives, a form of linguistic expertise that has often been overlooked by adults (Valdés 2003).

Because of these experiences, Elisa was acutely aware of the importance of linguistic access for minoritized groups and individuals in institutional contexts. During a SKILL class discussion of youth interpreting, for example, she noted proudly that her interpreting work in local elementary schools enabled Spanish-speaking parents to become more involved in their children's education. Hence, when she herself faced an institutional obstacle to linguistic access at her own high school, she was quick to challenge this exclusionary practice.

Elisa had been selected by school officials as a commencement speaker at Mission City High's graduation ceremony, an honor reserved for the most distinguished seniors. The school required student speakers to submit their speeches in advance for approval. Drawing on her linguistic expertise, Elisa wrote her speech entirely in Spanish. However, when she submitted the speech, she was told that she would have to translate it into English before the ceremony so that the audience could understand what she was saying.

Although she could have easily complied thanks to her bilingual skills, Elisa did not acquiesce to this institutional demand. Instead, she argued that Mission City High School did not have any written policy barring the use of languages other than English in commencement speeches, and she pointed out that because Latinx students were the school's largest ethnoracial group, most audience members would in fact be likely to understand a Spanish-language speech. She also emphasized that she had written her speech in Spanish precisely to ensure that she would be understood by the audience members who were most important to her: her own parents.

Elisa ultimately convinced the school officials, and on graduation day she delivered her speech entirely in Spanish; her English translation appeared in the commencement program. Her language access campaign became the focus of her SKILLS project, and she proudly reported on her success at her final public presentation. Not only was she able to ensure her own family's linguistic inclusion in one of the most important moments in her life, but she also won this right for the families of future student commencement speakers. Elisa's agency and activism are evident in her unflagging work for linguistic access for Spanish speakers, which disrupted in a small but very real way a longstanding pattern of sociolinguistic injustice in the United States.

Example 2: Oaxacan Youth and Linguistic Marginalization

Our second example is taken from the research of SKILLS team members Katie Lateef-Jan, Jessica Love-Nichols, and Anna Bax (2017) at another partner site, a community organization for indigenous Mexicans working in the agricultural industry south of Santa Barbara. The organization primarily serves Mixtec and Zapotec speakers and their families from Oaxaca and adjacent Mexican states, who confront a double burden of inequality due to severe racial, linguistic, and economic discrimination both in Mexico and in the United States (Fox and Rivera-Salgado 2004). Moreover, this highly vulnerable group is often invisible within the larger Mexican immigrant population, and its members are commonly misidentified as Spanish speakers, despite the fact that many indigenous Mexicans are not proficient in Spanish. Along with its many other services, our partner organization hosts a youth group that has undertaken several high-profile activist campaigns to advance linguistic and social justice for indigenous Mexicans in California, including combating the racist bullying of Oaxacan youth in schools and advocating for school-based interpreter services to facilitate greater parental involvement in their children's education.

We began our partnership with the organization in 2016. Most youth group members were bilingual or trilingual in Spanish and/or English and their indigenous home language, although some were losing proficiency in the latter due to pressures from English and Spanish. Because the students were especially interested in maintaining and learning about their languages of heritage—itself a form of activism in the context of U.S. language hierarchies (Leeman, Rabin, and Román-Mendoza 2011)—the instructors' curriculum explored the

effects of colonialism on indigenous languages and introduced tools for writing Mixtec and Zapotec, which are mostly unwritten languages. Students used these resources along with their multilingual expertise to create trilingual literacy materials for children and adults in their community (Figure 17.1).

Partway through the SKILLS program, the instructors suggested to the students that they present some of their work at an upcoming local linguistics conference on indigenous languages of the Americas. Eager to raise linguists' awareness of the challenges facing indigenous Mexican communities in the United States, the young people decided to create a documentary film about their experiences of living in multiple languages, from the pain of linguistic racism, linguistic shame, and language shift under conditions of immigration to their strong sense of indigenous identity and their hopes of maintaining or regaining their languages. Two undergraduate film studies students helped the students with the technical aspects of the production. The result was a fifteen-minute multilingual documentary in Mixtec, Zapotec, Spanish, and English, with the Spanish title *Orgullosamente Indígena* ('Proud to be Indigenous').

This deeply affecting film was screened at the linguistics conference as well as at other local venues; portions were also presented at the Linguistic Society of America national conference. However, because of the very real threat to the youth and their families due to federal anti-immigrant policies, the film had to be removed from public circulation. Despite this setback, these youth activists, accompanied by the SKILLS team, were able to reach a wide audience with a powerful message about their ongoing struggle for sociolinguistic justice for themselves and their community.

Figure 17.1 Poster Created by Youth of Mixtec and Zapotec Heritage to Foster Trilingual Literacy.

Example 3: Valeria and Linguistic Racism

Our final example focuses on another student at Mission City High School, Valeria (a pseudonym), who participated in SKILLS as a sophomore in 2012 (Ferrada, Bucholtz, and Corella forthcoming). In their curriculum, the graduate instructors developed a strong focus on linguistic discrimination and linguistic racism, issues that spoke powerfully to the largely bilingual Latinx youth they were working with. As the instructors prepared the students to develop their final projects, they shared a set of stark examples of anti-Spanish sentiment in public discourse, such as signs in Mock Spanish (Hill 1999) bearing offensive slogans like "I No Speaka Spanish. I Speak English." One of these examples in particular had a powerful impact on Valeria, a quiet, deep-thinking student.

The example that struck Valeria so profoundly was a video clip of a highly controversial speech by former Republican leader Newt Gingrich in 2007 when he was contemplating running for the U.S. Presidency. In the clip, Gingrich condemns bilingual education, proclaiming, "We should replace bilingual education with . . . immersion in English, so people learn the common language of the country and so they learn the language of prosperity, not the language of living in a ghetto." While all the students responded to this statement with anger and disbelief, Valeria's reaction was particularly strong: She wept quietly throughout the group's discussion of how to challenge such racist discourse through a collaborative public awareness campaign.

Importantly, Valeria's emotions were a source of great strength for her. For the rest of the class period and over the next few weeks, she worked intensively to develop a pair of bilingual posters with the message "Todos los idiomas son creados iguales/All Languages Are Created Equal." Below this slogan, she added more detailed text that concluded as follows (in the English version): "I value Spanish and English equally, just as other multilinguals value their languages equally. My languages make me who I am. I am my language. Respect my voice."

The strength of Valeria's words on her poster was matched by the emotional power of her public presentation. Standing before an audience of a hundred adults and peers, she spoke with quiet dignity through her tears as she described her reaction to Gingrich's hateful words. The poster that she displayed to her hushed and damp-eyed listeners (and that was later posted at her school and elsewhere) features a photo of herself, wearing a solemn expression and an American flag T-shirt (Figure 17.2). As activist interventions, the presentation and poster were decisive rebukes to the un-American values of a national politician. Through her courageous action to confront racist political rhetoric despite the personal pain it caused her to do so, Valeria became an agent for sociolinguistic justice for herself, her family, and her community.

Conclusion

We find it striking, and moving, that members of the post-Proposition 227 generation, who have had little or no access to bilingual resources in their

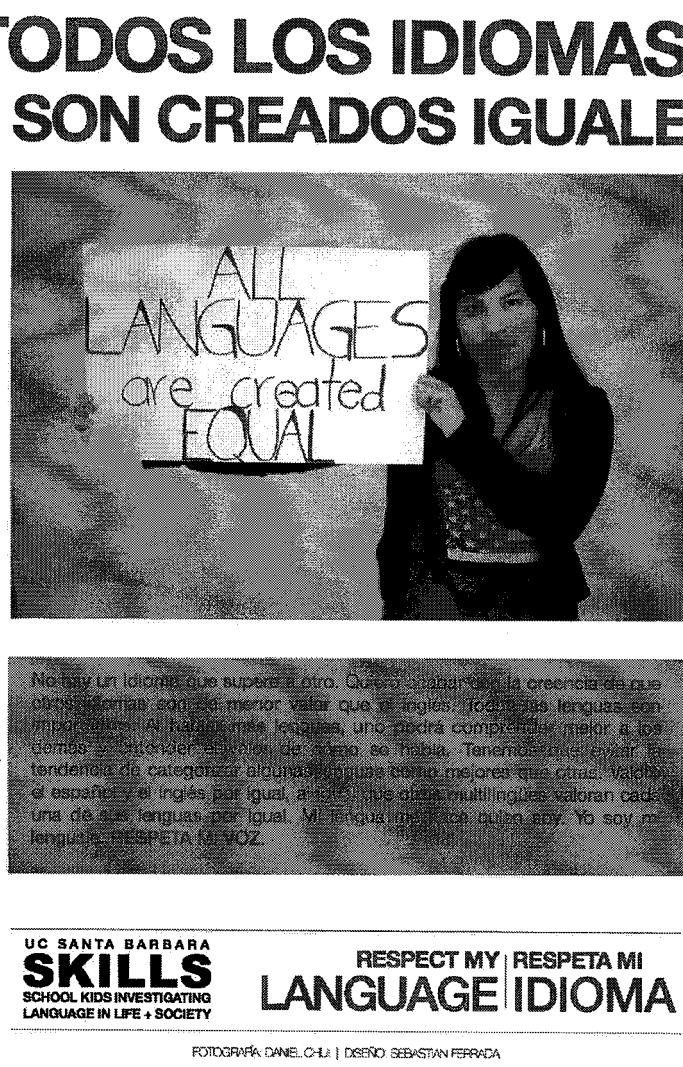

Figure 17.2 Valeria's Language Awareness Campaign Poster (Spanish Version).

schools, have emerged as powerful activists and advocates for sociolinguistic justice. Such students are facilitating basic human rights for speakers of minoritized languages: to be respected, to communicate—even simply to listen and understand. Abandoned by an educational system that has refused to acknowledge, much less validate, their home languages, these young people nonetheless insist on being recognized as speakers of Spanish, of Mixtec, of Zapotec.

In our work within SKILLS, it is clear to us that young people's positionality as agents, and not merely beneficiaries, of social change, is crucial to the goal of fostering sociolinguistic justice. Youth activism around language takes many forms, from claiming students' right to use their heritage languages to demanding greater public awareness of and accountability for linguistic inequities. Acknowledging, learning from, and accompanying youth in their agentive action has been central to our efforts to make our own teaching and research about language, race, culture, and identity more just, inclusive, humanizing, and culturally sustaining (Bucholtz, Casillas, and Lee 2018; Paris and Alim 2017; Paris and Winn 2014).

Such efforts are more important than ever in the current social and political climate. To be sure, Proposition 58 is a step in the right direction. And in response to Arizona's ethnic studies ban, California educators, students, parents, policymakers, and activists launched the Ethnic Studies Now campaign, leading in September 2016 to the passage of a state law to create an ethnic studies curriculum for California's public schools. Moreover, most of California's public schools, including those in Santa Barbara, have become majority-Latinx, and many school boards are now more representative of the families they serve, in both their demographics and their politics.

But despite these bright spots, the national political climate threatens greater struggles ahead. The openly racist and xenophobic rhetoric inflamed by Republican politicians during and after the 2016 Presidential election has taken a grave toll on young people of color. A sharp increase in incidents of hate speech, harassment, and assault directed at Latinx and immigrant students as well as other vulnerable groups led the Santa Barbara School Board to pass a resolution declaring local public schools safe zones for all students (Hamm 2016). This resolution shows how far Santa Barbara's schools have come in recognizing their responsibility to support and protect young people, but at the same time it also reveals how far we still have to go as a nation to defeat the forces of racism, fear, and hatred. Now more than ever, we are committed to working through the SKILLS program to accompany Latinx youth as agents and activists of social change, as they fight—with passion, with purpose, and with deep wisdom—for greater sociolinguistic justice in an increasingly unjust world.

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Note

1 Proposition 187 was ruled unconstitutional in 1997 but was not removed from the state's legal code until 2014. Proposition 63 remains in effect.

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